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ABSTRACT

Current literature on sex-role attitudes has several shortcomings, including a paucity of longitudinal and developmental data. Cross-sectional data collected in the mid-1970's indicate that college students express more liberal attitudes toward women with increasing years of college attendance. This shift could be due to intraindividual changes or to differential drop-out of more traditionally oriented students. Longitudinal research by this author and colleagues supports the intraindividual shift hypothesis. In addition, differential dropout of relatively traditional students seems to be involved for women but not for men. Several demographic correlates of sex-role attitudes in college students have been identified. On the average, students with more liberal views are female, major in liberal arts, are less religious, get better grades, and come from larger communities. Cross-sectional studies of sex-role attitudes in children indicate that older students (grades 7-11) express more liberal views toward women's role than do younger students (grades 4-6). At all ages studied, females are less traditional than males. (Author)

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Development of Sex-Role Attitudes

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Despite the belief that sex-role attitudes are changing in our society, little is actually known about the dimensions or extent of this change. Current literature on sex-role attitudes is limited in several respects. Two shortcomings noted by Parelius (1975) are first, that most of the currently available studies were done too early to tap the influence of the women's movement; and second, that few studies have documented change with longitudinal data. In addition, little is known about the development of sex-role attitudes in children.

A number of instruments are available to measure attitudes toward women in adults. The one that is probably used most widely is the Attitudes Toward Women scale (AWS) developed by Spence and Helmreich (1972). As noted by Stein and Weston (1976), the AWS provides validity and standardization data for a well-defined norm group (i.e. college students enrolled in an introductory psychology course), and has high split-half reliability.

Cross-sectional data collected in the mid-1970's using the AWS indicate that college men and women show increasingly liberal attitudes with increasing years of college attendance (Etaugh, 1975; Etaugh and Gerson, 1974; Stein and Weston, 1976.) This shift away from traditional views of women as

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students progress through college has at least two possible explanations. Spence and Helmreich (1972) have attributed the shift to intraindividual changes resu lting from increased exposure to a liberal university atmosphere. However, differential dropout of more traditionally oriented students (the female who leaves school following marriage, for example) may also be an important determinant. A third possibility, of course, is that both factors operate simultaneously.

In an attempt to study this problem longitudinally, Etaugh and Bowen (1976) examined two subgroups of AWS scores which had been obtained 1 1/2 years earlier from more than 1300 university students. Scores of those students still enrolled at the university were compared with those of nongraduates who were no longer enrolled. There was a tendency for nonenrolled females to be more traditional than enrolled females, particularly at the junior level of college. This trend was not apparent for males. These data suggest that the more liberal attitudes toward women held by college upperclassmen may have somewhat different origins for male and female students. For women, but not for men, differential dropout of relatively traditional individuals may be involved. Another part of the same longitudinal study, currently in progress (Etaugh and Spandikow, unpublished data) has involved readministering the AWS to all students still enrolled at this same university 2 1/2 years after completing the AWS for the first time. Preliminary analyses of these data indicate an overall shift toward increasingly liberal attitudes over this period of time for both male and

female students, supporting the intraindividual shift hypothesis.

Some attitudes appear more resistant to change than others, however. While attitudes toward women's labor market rights have become more liberal, those involving the marital and maternal responsibilities of women have remained fairly traditional (Etaugh and Spandikow, unpublished data; Mason and Bumpass, 1975; Osmond and Martin, 1975; Parelius, 1975).

Several demographic correlates of sex-role attitudes in college students have been identified. Females, on the average, hold more liberal views than males. In addition, students with more liberal views major in the liberal arts, are less religious, get better grades, and come from larger communities (Bayer, 1975; Etaugh, 1975; Stein and Weston, 1976). Interestingly, these characteristics also distinguish politically liberal students or other adults from their politically conservative counterparts (Flacks, 1967; Selvin and Hagstrom, 1965; Stouffe 1955).

The few studies exploring development of sex-role attitudes have focused on fourth through eleventh graders (Entwistle and Greenberger, 1972; Etaugh, Brown, and Rose, unpublished data; Greenberg, 1972). Unfortunately, no standardized questionnaire appears to have been developed to study sex-role attitudes in children. Nevertheless, the research conducted so far is reasonably consistent in finding that older students (grades 7-11) generally express more liberal, egalitarian views towards women's role in society than do younger students (grades 4-6). At all ages studied, females are less traditional than males. The genesis of these attitudes in still younger children

needs to be examined. Toward this end, one of my graduate students, William Boyd, is currently attempting to construct a modified form of the short version of the AWS (Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp, 1973) for use with children as young as first and second graders.

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